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SUBJECT: ABDULLAH REGISTERS FOR PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

REF: KABUL 1131

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah registered his campaign for the presidential election today (May 6), signing up with two relatively unknown running mates) evidence that he had failed to attract support outside the splintering United Front opposition coalition. Abdullah joined a handful of other challengers in registering on the antepenultimate day of the registration period, bringing the total field to at least nine candidates including President Karzai (reftel). Aides to most other major potential candidates promised their campaigns would register before the May 8 deadline. End Summary.

Abdullah Signs Up

¶2. (SBU) Abdullah joined the race today after extensive negotiations with other opposition leaders and possible running mates broke down. At various points, Abdullah appeared close to signing pacts with Hazara leader Haji Mohammed Mohaqgeq, Junbesh leader Sayed Noorullah, and a number of second-tier Pashtun politicians. In the end, all the deals fell through. Likewise, Abdullah was unable to convince potential candidates Ashraf Ghani, Anwarulhaq Ahadi, Ali Ahmed Jalali, and Mirwais Yaseni to merge their campaigns with Abdullah at the top of a unity ticket. Several political observers believe a growing lack of confidence in Abdullah's ability to win cost him potential allies, many of which have re-opened dialogues with Karzai's campaign. Other politicians told PolOff Abdullah's association with the United Front had been a major barrier to attract support from outside groups. Lower House MP Fazel Karim Aimaq, an occasional member of the UF's central committee, pronounced the UF "dead" upon news of Abdullah's underwhelming slate and predicted several UF members would defect to other campaigns rather than associate with Abdullah's candidacy.

¶3. (SBU) Abdullah's choices for running mates came as a surprise, both for their relative obscurity and because neither name had surfaced among the dozens of rumored candidates before today. Abdullah chose Humayoun Shah Asifi to be his first vice presidential running mate. Asifi, a Pashtun, is an in-law of late king Zahir Shah. Asifi ran for president in 2004 and received 0.3 percent of the vote. Kidnappers took Asifi hostage for several weeks last year before Afghan security forces freed him. Former Kabul University Chancellor Cheragh Ali Cheragh, a Hazara, is Abdullah's choice for second vice president. One Embassy local employee reported that Kabul University students heavily disliked Cheragh during his tenure as chancellor for his ill temper and apparent bias toward Hazaras.

Minor Candidates Also Join the Race

¶4. (SBU) In addition to Karzai and Abdullah, at least seven other candidates have now registered: former Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabet, Turkmen leader Akbar Bai, former

communist Shanawaz Tanai, Lower House MP Shahla Atta, businessman Besmullah Sher, former Najibullah-era Deputy Prime Minister Mahboobullah Koshani, and Dr. Ferozan Fana. Atta and Fana became the first female candidates to register. Atta holds American citizenship, but had not visited the Embassy to renounce her citizenship prior to registering.

Remaining Campaigns Still Waiting

15. (SBU) An aide to Lower House Deputy Speaker Mirwais Yaseni (Nangarhar, Pashtun) said his campaign would finalize Yaseni's ticket before Thursday afternoon. Yaseni has selected Lower House MP Abdul Qayum Sajaddi (Ghazni, Hazara) as one vice presidential running mate, but was still looking for a Tajik or Uzbek to round out the slate. Yaseni and other unregistered candidates were waiting to see whether outrage over Karzai's decision to tap Marshall Fahim as his running mate would spark a last-minute motivation for opposition groups to merge their campaigns.

16. (SBU) Former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani issued a statement denying rumors he had pulled out of the race and vowed his campaign would continue. Ghani said he had rejected appeals from Karzai and Cabinet ministers to join the government, criticizing the Karzai administration for being rife with corruption and lacking a coherent strategy.

17. (SBU) Several Afghan Millat party members have hinted former Finance Minister and party chairman Anwarulhaq Ahadi is ready to end his campaign. Pir Gailani, Ahadi's father-in-law and a Karzai supporter, has apparently

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persuaded Ahadi to drop his bid and support the government. At least one Afghan Millat MP was hopeful that Ahadi's potential withdrawal would come without an endorsement for Karzai, freeing the party to endorse another campaign.
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